

DECISION RECORD

Reference: Environmental Assessment for Grazing Authorization, #NM-066-98-077

Decision: It is my decision to authorize the issuance of a ten year grazing lease to Ron Merritt, Jr. for the Bureau of Land Management grazing allotment #63014. The lease will authorize 14 cows yearlong at 100% Federal Range from March 1 to the end of February, for 168 Animal Unit Months (AUM's). Any additional mitigation measures identified in the environmental impacts sections of the referenced environmental assessment have been formulated into stipulations, terms and conditions. Any comments made to this proposed action were considered and any necessary changes have been incorporated into the environmental assessment.

If you wish to protest this proposed decision in accordance with 43 CFR 4160.2, you are allowed 15 days to do so in person or in writing to the authorized officer, after the receipt of this decision. Please be specific in your points of protest. In the absence of a protest, this proposed decision will become the final decision of the authorized officer without further notice, in accordance with 43 CFR 4160.3. A period of 30 days following receipt of the final decision, or 30 days after the date the proposed decision becomes final, is provided for filing an appeal and petition for the stay of the decision, for the purpose of a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge (43 CFR 4.470).

The appeal shall be filed with the office of the Field Office Manager, 2909 West Second, Roswell, NM, 88201, and must state clearly and concisely your specific points.

Signed by T. R Kreager
Assistant Field Manager

8/13/99
Date

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
FOR
GRAZING AUTHORIZATION**

ALLOTMENT 63014

EA-NM-066-98-077

AUGUST, 1998

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
ROSWELL FIELD OFFICE
ROSWELL, NEW MEXICO**

Environmental Assessment for Grazing Allotment 63014

I. Introduction

A. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

The grazing regulations 43 CFR allow for a ten-year lease to be issued for grazing outside the grazing district boundary. A site specific analysis of the impacts of renewing a grazing lease to the applicant, Ron L. Merritt, Jr., is needed for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and to make an informed decision.

This document will analyze the site specifics of authorizing the renewal of the lease on allotment 63014. This allotment is within the *Pinion/Juniper* vegetative community as identified in the Roswell Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/EIS). Vegetative communities managed by the Roswell Field Office are identified and explained in the RMP/EIS. Appendix 11 of the draft RMP/EIS describes the Desired Plant Community (DPC) concept and identifies the components of each community.

B. Conformance with Land Use Planning

The Roswell Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (October 1997) has been reviewed to determine if the proposed action conforms with the land use plan's Record of Decision. The Roswell Resource Management Plan/ Environmental Impact Statement(RMP/EIS) states a livestock grazing management goal of providing effective and efficient management of allotments to maintain, improve and monitor range conditions. The proposed action is consistent with the RMP/EIS.

C. Relationships to Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans

The proposed action is consistent with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (43 U.S.C. 1700 et seq.); the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 (43 U.S.C. 315 et seq.), as amended; the Clean Water Act (CWA)(33 U.S.C. 1251 et seq.), as amended; the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. 1535 et seq.) as amended; and the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 (43 U.S.C. 1901 et seq.).

II. Proposed Action and Alternatives

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action is to authorize the grazing lease on allotment #63014 for 14 Animal Units (AUs) year long for 168 animal unit months (AUMs). The lease would be offered to Ron L. Merritt, Jr..

B. No authorization alternative

This alternative, if selected, would be to not issue a new grazing lease for allotment 63014. No grazing would occur on federal land in allotment 63014 under this alternative.

III. Affected Environment

General Setting

Allotment #63014 is located in Lincoln County, about 65 miles northwest of Roswell, New Mexico. The allotment is made up of three pastures and two traps. These pastures are fenced with net wire fencing. The allotment is watered by pipeline systems supplied by wells and by dirt tanks. There are six troughs supplied by the water pipelines. This allotment consists of 600 acres of Federal land, 3,183 acres of State Land, and 2,531 acres of private land (See attached map).

The area of allotment 63014 consists of rolling grass covered hills. Grass species comprise 90+% of the existing plant community. The average recorded precipitation for the area is 15.87 inches.

The following resources or values are not present or would not be affected: Prime/Unique Farmland, Cultural Resources, Native American Religious Concerns, Riparian/Wetlands, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Hazardous Wastes, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, and Minority/Low Income Populations.

A. Affected Resources

1. Soils

The soil association present on allotment 63014 is the Pastura-Deama-Darvey association. These soils are very shallow, very deep, well drained, nearly level to moderately sloping; on hills, mesa sides, piedmonts, and valley sides. These soils have a caliche layer at five to 20 inches under the surface. The erodability is

moderate to low for both water and wind. More information on the soils can be found in the, "Soil Survey of Lincoln County Area New Mexico".

2. Vegetation

One ecological (range) site covers all of the federal land in allotment 63014. The site is shallow C-3. Blue grama is the dominate grass species present with 42% of the composition. New Mexico feathergrass is common with 12%. Various other grasses include Black grama, three-awn, Sideoats grama, Wolf tail, and Sand dropseed. Shrub and half-shrubs include Yucca, colla cactus, wolfberry, snakeweed, and fringed sage. Forbs of various species occurs when moisture conditions are favorable.

There is one vegetative study on this allotment which was established and monitored in 1991. Analysis of the monitoring data from 1991 indicates that there is sufficient forage for 14 AUs. The data shows the ecological condition for the area evaluated to be in good condition. Copies of the monitoring data and the analysis of the data are available at the Roswell Field Office.

3. Wildlife

The area provides habitat for small animals, birds, rodents, and a very small population of mule deer. The area is lacking in brush or tree species that would provide cover for larger animals.

4. Threatened and Endangered Species

The only known threatened or endangered species of plants or animals on allotment 63014 is the bald eagle. A list of federal threatened, endangered and candidate species reviewed for this EA can be found in Appendix 11 of the Roswell Approved RMP (AP-2). Of the listed species, avian species such as the bald eagle and peregrine falcon, may be observed in the general geographic area during migration or winter months. There are no designated critical habitat areas within the allotment.

5. Livestock Management

The allotment is grazed by cattle. The latest grazing permit was for 14 cows. The cattle are rotated in the three pastures based on a best pasture system. The traps are grazed on a periodic basis, usually when livestock are gathered for branding, shipping, etc.

6. Visual Resources

Allotment 63014 is located within a Class IV Visual Resource Management area. The Class IV rating means that contrasts may attract attention and be a dominant feature in the landscape in terms of scale. However, the changes should repeat the basic elements of the landscape.

7. Water Quality

No permanent live water exists in the area, but four dirt tanks have been constructed in natural depressions to catch and hold water during precipitation events. The amount of water and the period of retention are dependent on the weather conditions.

8. Floodplains (CWA)

The areas around Bethel Tank, Red Bluff Tank, and the tank at the house are classified as floodplain areas. These areas are included in the 100 year floodplain, meaning that on average these areas would be flooded once every 100 years.

9. Air Quality

Air quality is generally good. The area is in a Class II area for the prevention of significant deterioration of air as defined in the federal Clean Air Act. Class II areas allow a moderate amount of air quality degradation.

10. Recreation / Cave and Karst

Recreation opportunities are very limited in this grazing allotment because the public has limited legal/physical access to public lands. The parcels of Public lands within this allotment are scattered and are generally surrounded by private lands.

Off Highway Vehicle designation for public lands within this allotment are classified as "Limited" to existing roads and trails.

A complete significant cave or karst inventory has not been completed for the public lands located in this grazing allotment. Presently, no known significant caves or karst features have been identified within this allotment. If at a later date, a significant cave or karst feature is located on public lands within this allotment, that cave or feature may be fenced to exclude livestock grazing and Off Highway Vehicle Use. A separate Environmental analysis would be prepared to construct this enclosure fence.

This allotment is located within a designated area of high karst or cave potential.

IV. Environmental Impacts

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action

1. Soils

The soils will be influenced by livestock grazing directly by compaction, trailing that may break through the turf, chipping of soil surface caused by hoof action, and recycling of nutrients. Infiltration rates will be increased by chipping of soil surface over most of the area but will be decreased by compaction around watering, trailing, and bedding areas. The area of compaction would be relatively small. Livestock remove standing vegetation that would have reduced the erosive forces of wind, rain, and surface runoff. Proper utilization levels and grazing distribution patterns under the present operation retain sufficient vegetative cover so as to maintain the stability of the soils. The level of grazing identified in the proposed action, would continue to maintain an adequate ground cover for protection and development of the soils. The percent vegetative composition, bare ground and rock found on the allotment fall within the parameters established by the RMP/EIS for this vegetative community.

2. Vegetation

Vegetation grazed by domestic livestock and wildlife is not adversely affected unless the amount of utilization is severe over an extended period of time. Ecological condition as shown by the 1991 study indicates that the vegetation is sustainable at the past and proposed amount of grazing by livestock.

3. Wildlife

Wildlife will continue to compete with domestic livestock for forage and browse. Cover habitat for wildlife will remain the same as the existing situation. The lack of adequate cover for wildlife species will continue to be a limiting factor in this area. Maintenance and operation of existing watering will continue to provide dependable water sources for wildlife, as well as livestock.

4. Threatened and Endangered Species

Livestock grazing, as a result of renewal of the grazing lease, may affect, but not likely adversely affect the bald eagle. It is expected that habitat and range condition would be maintained or improved by authorizing grazing conducive with vegetation production goals. Habitat for wintering bald eagles would not be negatively impacted by livestock grazing. There would be no effect to the

peregrine falcon as important riparian habitat or potential nest sites are not found on the allotment. No occupied or historic nesting habitat occurs within the allotment or within 3400 meters (2.1 mi.) of the exterior allotment boundary.

5. Livestock Management

The proposed action would allow the existing livestock management to continue. The existing management is not causing any adverse impacts to the environment. The distribution and supply of livestock water is available for wildlife. Livestock under rotation grazing will continue to increase ground cover by stimulating growth of vegetation and by scattering litter which protects the soil from wind and water erosion.

6. Visual Resources

The continued grazing of livestock would not affect the form or color of the landscape, or the primary aspect of the vegetation within the allotment.

7. Water Quality

Livestock grazing will not have a significant influence on water quality. Ground water is pumped from a well. The amount of sediments into the dirt tanks is directly related to the intensity and duration of the precipitation occurrence and affected only slightly by livestock grazing activities. The ground water is not affected by livestock grazing.

8. Floodplains (CWA)

The proposed action of authorizing livestock grazing will have little or no influence on the floodplain areas identified. Livestock in these areas will naturally move to high ground during storm events.

9. Air Quality

The proposed action will not have measurable effect on the air quality.

10. Recreation / Caves and Karst

Grazing would have little or no affect on the recreational opportunities, since the recreating public has no legal or physical access to this parcel of public land. Recreation activities that could occur within this grazing allotment are limited or non-existent due to land patterns.

No known significant caves or karst features are known to exist on the public lands located within this allotment. Grazing would not affect the karst resources.

B. Impacts of the No Livestock Grazing Alternative.

1. Soils

The soil will not be subjected to compaction, chipping, and standing vegetation reduction that are associated with livestock grazing. The stability and development of the soil would be about the same as with grazing. Soil compaction would be reduced on the allotment around old trails and drinking troughs.

2. Vegetation

There would be a small change in the types and amounts of vegetation found within the allotment. It is expected that the number of plant species found within the allotment will remain the same. Vegetation will continue to be utilized by wildlife but the removal of the standing vegetation by livestock would be absent, which would result in an increase in the amount of standing vegetation.

3. Wildlife

There would be no competition between livestock and wildlife for forage and cover. There would be no maintenance of livestock waters. As these waters became defunct, water availability would become a critical limiting factor for many wildlife species.

4. Threatened and Endangered Species

There would be very little, if any, change to the bald eagle or the peregrine falcon habitat if the no grazing alternative was selected.

5. Livestock Management

Under the no grazing alternative there would be no grazing on the federal land in the area of allotment 63014. This would have an adverse economic impact to the livestock operation.

6. Visual Resources

No change in the visual resources; scale, land-form, and color; with the no grazing alternative.

7. Water Quality

A slight improvement in surface water quality will be achieved with the no grazing alternative. This is anticipated because the removal of standing vegetation will not be occurring to the degree allowed in the proposed action. More standing vegetation will slow runoff during precipitation events which will reduce sediments into the water. Ground water will not be changed by the no grazing alternative.

8. Floodplains

There would be no change to the Zone A floodplain areas with the no grazing alternative.

9. Air Quality

There would be no change to the in air quality with the no grazing alternative.

10. Recreation / Caves and Karst

No impacts to recreation, caves or karst will occur under the no action alternative.

V. Cumulative Impacts

No cumulative impacts to the environment are anticipated by the authorization of grazing as listed in the proposed action or from the no action alternative.

VI. Residual Impacts

There are no residual impacts anticipated for the proposed action or the alternative(s).

VII. Mitigating Measure

If new information surfaces that indicate that livestock grazing is negatively affecting any other resources, action will be taken to mitigate those impacts.